

First Opinion: Flying Off the Pages with Lang Lang

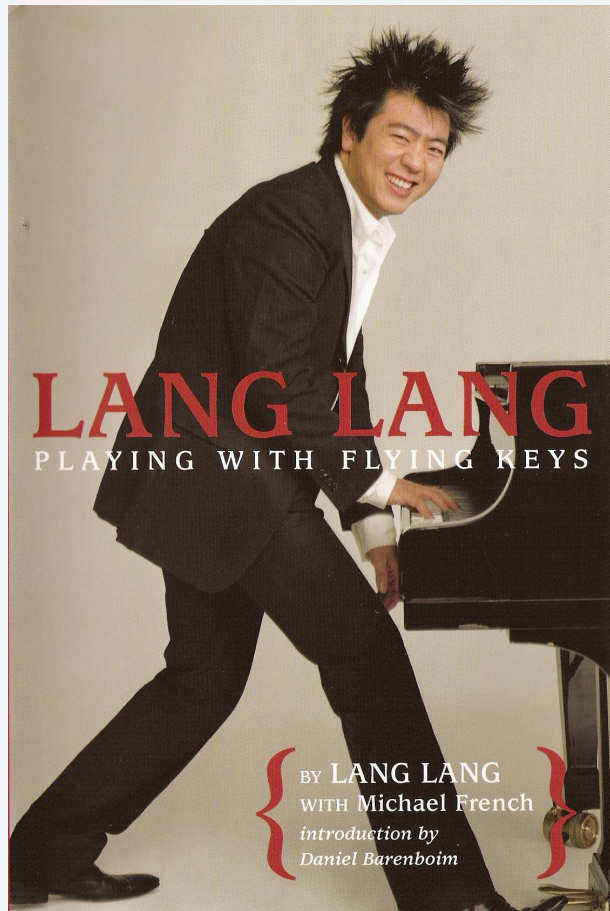
Lang, Lang, and Michael French. *Lang Lang: Playing with Flying Keys*. New York: Delacorte Press, 2008.

S. Beth May

World famous pianist Lang Lang has produced an autobiography that gives young readers insight into his early development and training as a pianist, showing his progression from star pupil in his hometown of Shenyang to concert pianist. Much of the book focuses on Lang's early years and on his troubled relationship with his father, who, like the father of Lang's favorite composer, Mozart, made Lang's ascent to the top of the piano world his life's goal.

While the role of the Cultural Revolution in the musical life of China is hinted at, little information is given that would explain to the young reader why Lang's father and his former teacher gave up their dreams of being performing musicians or why such pressure was then placed upon Lang to be a huge success. Without this information, Lang's father seems, at times, tyrannical, and his insistence that Lang be "#1" seems unacceptably obsessive. However, the descriptions of the amount of time and effort that went into Lang's training give readers a hint of the work ethic that is required for such an idealistic endeavor.

The book's strength lies in its direct descriptions of the thought processes and dreams of this young man. The plot follows the classic and exciting trajectory of many sports narratives— that is, it tells the story of a young man who works very hard and attains great goals through diligence, determination, and talent. The reader experiences Lang's



setbacks and hardships through the eyes of a young boy. Lang has done an impressive job of retaining the viewpoint of a much younger person, allowing the reader to relate to the thought processes of a child and teenager rather than imposing an adult's hindsight on his recollection of the events that he recalls.

Unfortunately, the book's similarity to a sports narrative is also one of its weaknesses. Although Lang does, at times, emphasize the importance of artistry, little of the book is spent describing his feelings or thoughts about music or his intellectual development. Instead, Lang relates information about competitions won and auditions aced, performances to awe-struck audiences and the reactions of reviewers. In a world that often seems to view classical performance as just another sport to be played and won through speed, strength, and endurance, it is unfortunate that Lang did not give music and musicianship the spotlight, but rather focused on the events and victories that led to his success.

About the author

S. Beth May is a music professor at Northwest Vista College in San Antonio, Texas. She began studying the piano at an early age and has always loved reading.